

# **Children And Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**7 March 2024**

## **Improvement Update**

Report from: Dr Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive

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### **Summary**

This report provides an update on progress in relation to ongoing improvements in services for children and families in Medway since the Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services which took place in July 2023.

#### **1. Recommendations**

- 1.1 The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the report, and the steps taken to drive and sustain ongoing improvements.
- 1.2 The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note that maintaining a focus on improving services and embedding changes will significantly contribute to better outcomes for children and families in Medway.

#### **2. Budget and policy framework**

- 2.1 This report supports the Council Strategy priority "Supporting Medway's people to realise their potential" to achieve the outcome 'Resilient Families'.

#### **3. Background**

- 3.1 The Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Services (ILACS) took place in July 2023, and the service was judged good overall. The service remains fully committed to continue to embed the improvements and improve outcomes for children and young people in Medway. A new Continuous Improvement Plan has been developed and the Continuous Improvement Board, which is multi agency, now meets three times a year to oversee, support and challenge progress against the plan.

- 3.2 Inspectors found that '**Children Matter in Medway**'.
- Services for children and families in Medway have substantially improved since the inspection in 2019.
  - Most families now receive the right support at the earliest opportunity and their situations improve.
  - Corporate and political leaders have addressed the systemic weaknesses and there is now a strong, determined and cohesive leadership team.
  - Improving the quality of support for the children of Medway is a clear priority for the collective corporate leadership team and there has been significant investment.
  - Significant improvements in the quality and impact of the corporate parenting board.
- 3.3 The areas identified for ongoing improvement include:
- The quality and impact of social work practice, specifically in the longer-term support provided to adolescents.
  - The quality and effectiveness of assessments, plans, interventions and responses for children who are at risk of exploitation and/or risk outside of the home.
  - The quality and variety of direct work and life-story work available to children.
  - The quality and consistency of assessments and planning to support disabled children.
  - The quality and consistency of management oversight.
  - Workforce capacity.
- 3.4 The new plan is structured to address those key priorities moving forward which are:
- Practice
  - Workforce
  - Leadership
  - Voice of the child, participation and engagement

## 4. Options

- 4.1 This report provides an update on progress since the ILACS in July 2023.

## 5. Advice and analysis

- 5.1 Since the ILACS inspection the service is evidencing consistent improvement in practice.
- 5.2 Performance data is produced and reviewed monthly, through service led performance clinics, and an Oversight meeting with corporate leaders. The dashboard is shared with the Continuous Improvement Board and reviewed at service wide quarterly whole service performance meetings.
- 5.2 Performance is showing an overall upward trajectory, not just through the dashboard but taking into account complaints data, performance indicators in the Council Plan and quality assurance data.

- 5.3 Audits of children's cases are carried out each month and over the last quarter, cases graded Good and Requires Improvement increased to 87% from 62% in the same quarter a year ago. Work graded Inadequate has dropped to 13%.
- 5.4 Vulnerable adolescents continue to be a priority for the service. In November 2023, the Adolescent service merged into the wider social work service following challenges in recruiting to the specialist teams, resulting in unmanageable caseloads and shortfalls in service delivery. Adolescent casework is now shared across Social Work teams which has created greater resilience and better support for staff. Assistant team manager roles have been created to offer improved management oversight and support. Missing and exploitation discussions are now undertaken within each service which has supported improved risk management plans and resulted in increased oversight of the response to children at risk of exploitation and those who go missing.
- 5.5 Our response to children and young people with a disability has become more consistent. A service restructure in June 2023 created an 0-17 service for children with a disability, and an 18-25 service to support young people better in their transition to adulthood. The creation of a dedicated Designated Social Care Officer role has created greater capacity to support work to strengthen SEND and transitions. Extensive work has been undertaken to improve the offer of services for children with a disability, including improved commissioning, increase in short breaks and floating support, and more specialist foster care. The recent SEND inspection, which took place in February 2024, noted evidence of consistency in practice but the service is aware that there is more to do to ensure effective social care input into EHCPs. However, there are still some challenges with the availability of resources, particularly timely access to short breaks. Work is in hand to try to address this.
- 5.6 Recruiting a permanent and stable workforce remains one of the biggest challenges to embedding improvements across the service. Turnover rate is 27% and vacancy levels for case holding social workers is 30%. This means that despite concerted effort on recruitment, the net gain remains neutral. Additional resources are being put into HR to support capacity in delivering swift and efficient recruitment practice, and the service is ensuring priority is given to retaining good quality staff, through development opportunities and temporary to permanent events. 'Grow Your Own' continues to provide a supply of Newly Qualified Social Workers with two active cohorts operating each year. Project teams have reduced caseloads level over the last year and will be gradually phased out as permanent recruitment and stability across the service increases.
- 5.7 There has been a concerted focus on throughput of work to support our principles of the right level of service delivery for each child, and this has resulted in a reducing number of children in need open to the service (from high of 662 June 2023, to 583 in December 2023).

5.8 Collaborative work with the commissioning team has resulted in fewer children in unregistered and unregulated settings, as well as improved choice for children.

## 6. Risk Management

6.1 The service is currently facing ongoing challenges to maintaining a sustained focus on improvement, which includes:

- pressure on the system and caseload levels
- unfilled posts and the challenges in sourcing agency social workers to cover vacancies
- sufficiency of placements for children in our care

6.2 The key risks are as follows:

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Action to avoid or mitigate risk</b>	<b>Risk rating</b>
<b>Operational risks</b>	Insufficient Workforce (Social Workers) to deliver statutory and non-statutory responsibilities	Additional recruitment resource.  Effective workforce planning.	BII
	Risk that improvement is not sustained	Service planning with regular oversight from management team Work of Continuous Improvement Board	CII
	Challenge of finding the right homes for children in our care	Work with commissioning to manage the market Support our foster carers to meet the more complex needs of our children	

<b>Likelihood</b>	<b>Impact:</b>
A Very likely B Likely C Unlikely D Rare	I Catastrophic II Major III Moderate IV Minor

## 7. Consultation

7.1 This improvement update has been undertaken in consultation with the children's social care workforce and colleagues in HR and Performance Management

## 8. Climate change implications

8.1 There are no implications as a direct result of the recommendations of this report.

## 9. Financial implications

9.1 The Service aims to draw on its improved reputation associated with a 'Good' rating from the latest Ofsted inspection which will have a beneficial impact on moving to a sustainable budget for the service.

### 9.2 Legal implications

10.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

## Lead officer contact

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## Appendices

Appendix 1, Recruitment Glidepaths

## Background papers

None.